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Sneaking Around the Law

Paris.

THERE IS a military coup of sorts going on in Honduras. It is not, however, a move by the Honduran military against what government there is in Tegucigalpa. It is a move by the American military against the government in Washington.

The American military, almost certainly with the advice and con-

By Richard Reeves

sent of the White House and the Central Intelligence Agency, now feels free to ignore and evade such inconveniences as the laws of the United States. Does the law prohibit the military from spending more than \$200,000 on "temporary" installations in Honduras - a road or a landing strip, for instance - without reporting to Congress? Well, then they say that a \$300,000 road is two \$150,000 roads.

That project, a military road just built in northern Honduras, is mentioned in a 35-page report about to be released by the General Accounting Office. The GAO charges that the amount of money being spent by the military in Honduras is far more than the \$3.7 million in construction costs reported there since 1983.

"This exercise-related construction has been used to support a continuous U.S. military presence in Honduras, carrying out a variety of training and operational functions," the GAO says, referring to a series of U.S. "temporary exercises" in Honduras. Then the agency adds, "Even at the time of construction, a more extensive use was contemplated."

The military was, in other words, lying from the beginning of the militarization of Honduras as a sort of stationary U.S. aircraft carrier in the middle of Central America. That truth seems obvious enough when

you travel that poor country talking to the many Americans hanging around the oddest places for reasons they can't or won't explain. "Just a vacation," said one of three young men in sports clothes arriving in a little hotel carrying spit-polished combat boots in airline tote bags.

A U.S. Army major grudgingly

paratroopers dropping toward us responded to a question of mine by saying, "What paratroopers?"

That sergeant covering his rear when I unexpectedly appeared was one thing. Coordinated high-level evasion is another. Fred Hiatt of the *Washington Post* reported recently on Army memos ordering officers to give "malfunction" as the reason if asked about crashes of unmanned U.S. reconnaissance planes shot down over hostile territory along Honduras' borders with Nicaragua and El Salvador.

It is increasingly obvious that the U.S. military, backed by the White House, considers itself in an adversarial relationship with not only the press, but with Congress and the people it is pledged to defend. On bigger issues than the sneaky militarization of poor little Honduras, the military's responses these days seem to reflect a contempt for both law and public opinion.

The Navy, for instance, says now that it would cost \$8 billion to build comparable facilities to replace U.S. bases in the Philippines. But less than two years ago, the official figure, given by Adm. Robert Long, then commander of all Pacific forces, was \$2 billion to \$4 billion. No one can explain where the extra \$4 billion to \$6 billion came from.

On the issue of nuclear testing, the Pentagon now maintains that the United States must continue testing to check the reliability of weapons. Since we have never mentioned that reason before during 30 years of test-ban discussion and debate, it seems logical for reasonable men to think that it just might be a fabrication - made up not to fool Russians but to mislead Americans.

So, what is going on far away in Honduras is happening as well in Washington. From sergeants to top commanders, the American military is apparently coming to think its mission is so critical as to be above civilian law. In banana republics, that is called a coup.

The U.S. military, almost certainly with the backing of the White House and the CIA, feels free to ignore and evade such inconveniences as the laws of the United States. In banana republics, that is called a coup.

conducting a tour of Palmerola Air Force Base for me and a couple of other reporters more than a year ago spent most of his time emphasizing that the canvas on tents had a useful life of only several months. "Temporary," he said over and over again. But he couldn't help adding, proudly, that the newly extended runway at what once had been the Honduran Air Force Academy could handle "almost everything in the U.S. inventory." What couldn't it handle? "The space shuttle," he said.

That and some of the obvious deceptions going on seem almost comic in the hazy, lazy land that was the first place called a "banana republic." An American in combat fatigues watching 100 Honduran